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ABSTRACT

Three writers debate whether English teachers should depend on external or internal criteria when analyzing and teaching literature. Each writer discusses the meaning of Elinor Wylie's poem, "The Eagle and the Mole," according to his particular view of literary analysis. Edward Ducharme, in "The Evasion of the Text," submits that superficial aspects of literature rather than skills in textual analysis are being taught to future English teachers, and defends his point with evidence from an exercise in poetic analysis in which more than 160 prospective English teachers failed to detect the underlying irony in Wylie's poem. Charles Hoffman, in "Invasion of the Text," submits that Wylie's poem is not ironic in tone, that Ducharme is infusing his own life view into his interpretation rather than using biographical criticism and the corpus of Wylie's work to determine the poem's meaning. Ducharme, in "Again, Evasion of the Text," defends his view that understanding literature depends, not on secondary sources, but on the confrontation between reader and literary work, and explicates the poem to indicate where the irony lies. Finally, Edward Kelly defends an ironic interpretation of the poem, faults both Ducharme and Hoffman for relying on fixed literary positions, and analyzes the poem by both external and internal literary means. (JB)

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THE EVASION OF THE TEXT

Edward R. Ducharme

> Our real quarrel is with the incessant superficiality of much classroom study of literature—with, if you will, the evasion of literature represented in too many classrooms. Despite a decade of recommendations to the contrary, many teachers continue to teach the dates and places as if these and not the literary works were the essence of our subject: an over-reliance on history and geography, a preoccupation with the lives of the poets, a fascination with the Elizabethan stage, a concern with definition and memory work (the Petrarchian sonnet, the heroic couplet, the accepted definition of figures of speech)—these clutter the minds of too many teachers and students alike. Intelligently used to serve the interest of literary study, they can provide needed tools and understanding. Forced to center stage, they can only divert attention. And center stage they too often occupy. Far more frequently than the classroom in which young people were learning to analyze a single text with insight and ability, we found this emphasis on the superficial.
>
> Why, we do not know. Our teachers seem well schooled in modern critical approaches, yet seem not to use these approaches in their actual instruction. They fail to recognize that so many of the methods of attacking a literary work developed by the modern critics provide exciting approaches for students as well. Have teachers themselves learned about such approaches without learning to use them? It does seem that some of the important approaches to modern scholarship and teaching methods which have revolutionized college teaching are not yet being widely applied in the schools.[1]

These remarks were part of a summary article highlighting the findings of the two-and-one-half year study of over 150 high schools in 45 states. In the report considerable attention was directed at the teaching of literature. The findings were scarcely comforting for those advocating the close study of literature. However, before commenting on some of the findings, a word about the schools themselves is in order.

The schools were among those in the nation which consistently produce "Achievement Award Winners" in the National Council of Teachers of English contests. Statistics presented in the report show that the teachers in these schools have better-

[1] James Squire, "Study of High School English Programs," College English, May, 1966, p. 619.

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than-average preparation. On the basis of the total population of English teachers, they perform better on standardized tests; they belong to more professional groups; they subscribe to more professional and scholarly journals. In brief, they were a group of superior teachers by such standards. The compilers of the report felt that the secondary schools in which they taught were among the superior schools in the nation.[2]

The teachers in these schools were asked to evaluate the courses they had taken as undergraduates and to suggest courses they would like to take. They placed courses in the close reading literature third in importance; the only other types of courses ranking higher in their estimate were those in particular periods and those in literary criticism. Ranking considerably lower were courses in literary surveys, genres, and literature for adolescents. Further, when asked to express *Agree, Disagree,* or *Uncertain* about the assertion that "It is necessary to teach some literature (primarily poems and short stories) through close textual analysis to help the student develop an appreciation of good literature," 83.5 percent agreed. Only 8.7 percent disagreed; the remainder were, of course, undecided. Curiously enough, 20.1 percent agreed with the assertion that "A critical and comprehensive analysis of a poem will do more to destroy the beauty than it will to develop its literary appreciation among students." Still, the background of the teachers in terms of courses and their own stated beliefs in the importance of close reading should have almost guaranteed that these teachers would have frequently used such a method of instruction. The observers reported the contrary; only occasionally did they see such teaching. There was some evidence that, on occasion, close reading did go on in the schools.

> Advanced courses in literature, oriented around the individual text and close analytical study, are being introduced in a few locations, and, not infrequently, are providing the context for some of the most exciting teaching observed by project observers.[3]

The compilers of the report ask one important question in their remarks about the lack of close reading: "If teachers have been educated in the processes themselves, as many report they have been, why have close reading experiences been so seldom observed in the classroom "[4] The report does not answer the question.

Because of my own interest in close reading as a viable way

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[2] James R. Squire and Roger K. Applebee, A Study of English Programs in Selected High Schools Which Consistently Educate Outstanding Students in English, Cooperative Research Project No. 1994 (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1966), pp. 9-28.

[3] Squire and Applebee, A Study of English Programs, p. 160.

[4] Ibid., pp. 178-179.

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of studying literature and seven years of teaching literature to high school students through close reading, I was intrigued by the implications of some of the questions raised in the study. Frankly, I was less sanguine than Squire about the teachers being "well schooled in modern critical approaches," despite the evidence contained in the study that teachers have had specific training in this area.

As a means of tentatively exploring this situation, I gave an exercise in poetry analysis in 1966-67 to over two hundred students then in teacher preparation programs. All but fifteen of these were in M.A. programs; the fifteen were in their senior year in a liberal arts institution. Most of these students had, to be sure, classroom experience beyond student teaching, but the rest were, at most, a semester away from teaching. Here were presumably bright students being trained to be English teachers. They were, almost without exception, graduates of liberal arts colleges, English majors who had received what would undoubtedly be regarded as a superior education. Could they read poetry?

The students had forty-five minutes to answer five questions about Elinor Wylie's "The Eagle and the Mole." [5] All of the responses were written in class situations; the students were told that the exercise was not going to count towards a grade. The name of the poet was omitted (only six students recognized the author).

"The Eagle and the Mole" is a poem of moderate difficulty; it currently appears in several recently published anthologies designed for high school students. The assumption of the editors of these anthologies must be that, given some guidance, the students should be able to understand the poem. The guidance, of course, would come from people like those who wrote the exercise.

As indicated earlier, all respondents had forty-five minutes to answer the questions. To some this may seem like a short time; yet high school students taking the senior Advanced Placement English examinations have between forty and sixty minutes to answer from five to eight questions about a poem generally more complex than is "The Eagle and the Mole." Further, these students in high school are writing under the pressure of grades, something that those writing this exercise were not doing. In this exercise the students were merely expected to indicate some rudimentary grasp of the poem, a far cry from understanding it sufficiently well to teach it to others. The exercise and the student responses are not meant as rigid,

[5] Elinor Wylie, The Collected Poems of Elinor Wylie, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p. 4.

scientifically assessed data. Rather, they are intended as a preliminary reading of a part of the present teacher education population. Forty-five minutes should be adequate for students to demonstrate some insight into the poem.

The text of the poem, together with the questions asked, appears below.

DIRECTIONS: Read the following poem several times carefully. Then, in direct and clear statements, answer the questions that follow. Be sure to read all of the questions before answering any of them so as to avoid answering two questions in one answer. (45 minutes)

THE EAGLE AND THE MOLE *

Avoid the reeking herd,
Shun the polluted flock,
Live like that stoic bird,
The eagle of the rock.

The huddled warmth of crowds
Begets and fosters hate;
He keeps, above the clouds,
His cliff inviolate.

When flocks are folded warm,
And herds to the shelter run,
He sails above the storm,
He stares into the sun.

If in the eagle's track
Your sinews cannot leap,
Avoid the lathered pack,
Turn from the steaming sheep.

If you would keep your soul
From spotted sight or sound,
Live like the velvet mole;
Go burrow underground.

And there hold intercourse
With roots of trees and stones,
With rivers at their source,
And disembodied bones.

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1. Line 13 marks a change in the tone of the poem. How does it change at that point?

1a. If you were—for purposes of pointing out a change in the speaker's tone—to separate the poem into two parts, where would you do so?

1b. What do you consider too be the basic tone of the poem? Demonstrate some justification for your choice.

2. In what ways does the poet characterize the herd? What conclusions do you draw about the herd as a result of the words used?

3. Consider the existences of the eagle and the mole as described in the poem. Is the existence of the one to be preferred to the other? Explain.

4. The title of the poem is "The Eagle and the Mole." In what way(s) is the poem NOT about the eagle and the mole?

5. What way of life does the TOTAL poem imply for man? Explain.

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In this poem, Elinor Wylie has posited three ways of life for man: the two extremes represented by the eagle and the mole and the life of the herd walking the earth that the others shun. While it may initially appear that Wylie favors the eagle or the mole to any type of herd existence, it becomes apparent that she is actually rejecting the ways of life represented by eagle and mole. She is indicating that the third alternative, the life among the herd, is indeed the only viable one, that the herd's way of life may engender hate, but it is the only life possible to man that offers communication and love. It *may* involve hate, but it is a risk that one must take; the alternatives offered are negations of life.

The questions were designed to elicit some broad response indicating how close the students had come to understanding the poem. In all three versions of the first question it was hoped that the students would comment upon the general tone of irony which pervades the poem. Even where students would use the word *sarcasm* one would be able to sense that they had gone beyond the literal. The second question was meant to call attention to both the negative and the positive adjectives and epithets used in conjunction with the herd. In responding to the third question, students were expected to see the way of life of both eagle and mole as equally sterile. The forth question focused attention on the figurative level rather than the literal meaning of the poem; commentary about the poem's being a series of remarks on the ways of life possible to man was anticipated. Finally, the fifth question, a summary kind of question, was aimed at having students see the poem as demanding involvement rather than withdrawal, that the kind of "life" ascribed to the eagle and the mole is actually a death, that the only kind of life for man is one among men. These, then, were the broad aims of the questions.

Some comment about the overall performance of students in this exercise is in order prior to a break-down into separate, more specific sections about the answers to each question. In general, students displayed a poor understanding of the poem. While there was little attempt at "hard-data" keeping in the reading of the responses, only fifteen percent of the students showed any understanding of the inherent irony of the poem. All the others, in answer after answer, wrote of the glories of the stoic eagle and the virtues of the withdrawn mole. Even such generalizations suggest the trend of the responses that represent the overwhelming majority of papers.

In selecting sample answers, I chose those representative of the types of student responses given. The aim is to give the range of answers the questions evoked, not the frequency. Since

most of the wrong answers were essentially the same, I selected those which seemed most representative.

The first question, the only one rewritten during the testing, was specifically directed at eliciting *some* remarks about tone. The poem achieves its effect largely through irony; it was hoped that early focusing of the students' attention on tone would help them start in the right direction. Often, students did not write of tone at all. It was apparent—at least among these students—that the problem of identifying and commenting upon tone is a difficult one.

Of course, not all the writers failed to talk about tone. Some used the word and then pointed out what they thought an appropriate description of the tone of the poem.

> Lines 1-12 would seem to suggest in milder, more gentle tones than the poet assumes with line 13. The similes and metaphors in the second half of the poem are harsher—"lathered pack," "steaming sheep." Whereas line 1-12 "suggest," the tone of the poem thereafter directs.

Finally, there were twenty-two students who wrote of irony or sarcasm.

> The tone of this poem appears to be one of sarcasm. I say this because the poet uses the images "stares into the sun," "If in the eagle's track your sinews cannot leap," "live like the velvet mole" (which is nearly blind) and "disembodied bones." It seems to suggest that even though the real life is rough, the way of the eagle and the mole might not be as easy as it might appear.

One final note on the first question. It was rewritten twice; once when I was unhappy with the results (few seemed to detect the irony), a second time when someone suggested that inasmuch as the entire tone is ironic, pointing to a specific change in line 13 might be misleading. This is undoubtedly true; the poet is, after all, ironic in her remarks about the eagle. Yet the use of the word *If* in line 13 is sufficiently strong in its effect to merit special attention. Be that as it may, the changes in questions produced no corresponding changes in responses. Those who knew something of literary tone in more than an abstract way could spot the heavier use of irony from line 13 on, or write about the generally ironic tone throughout. The remainder did not know what tone was, preferred to write about something else, or could not identify the tone of this poem.

The second question elicited generally derogatory remarks about, first of all, animals herds and, secondly, human beings in any sort of mob or crowd situation. For these students—about 160 in number—the poem had a single and single-minded literalness about it.

> He refers to the herd as reeking polluted flock, as begetting and fostering hate, the lathered packs, and steaming sheep. The poet had the utmost distaste for the herd.

There were those who saw the distinction between some of the direct adjectives and epithets and the later "huddled warmth"; they saw this latter quality, however, as a further negative attribute of the herd.

> The herd is characterized by its unpleasant smell, its corruption, its offering of comfort to its members, its cowardliness, its hate, its sweat. We can conclude that the herd has its attractions—a sense of belonging, a sense of anonymity, concealment, from the "storms of life." And yet this comfort is purchased at the expense of independence and integrity.

Only twenty writers saw the lives of the eagle and the mole as unsuitable ways of existing; they saw the herd existence as a possible way of life.

> The herd is first characterized by such words as "reeking and polluted" but as the poem moves on the focus seems to change. Although the herd may be weak and sinful, there is a certain positive side in the images of huddled warmth of crowds and flocks folded warm. The poet emphasizes the warmth of closeness and unity which overcome the negative characteristics.

In answering the third question, the students expressed an overwhelming preference for the eagle. One might have predicted that the symbolic eagle would have drawn many readers into misreadings; the eagle is, after all, a bird of strong symbolic value. Yet it is also a bird of prey; somehow, this latter consideration rarely came in. The eagle these readers saw is the magnificent American or Roman eagle, symbolic of power, independence, and resolution. The bird became a symbol for all that is admirable in the human spirit.

> I somehow believe that the life of the eagle is to be preferred to that of the mole. The words used to describe the eagle's existence (stoic, inviolate, sails above the storm, stares into the sun) are enhancing—raised above the banalities of everyday life. There is a looking *upward*, possibly forward (towards) God—the sun, the source of life and existence. There is an air of purity—a sense of oneness with oneself—or with God.

There were students for whom the ways of life of eagle and mole were equal alternatives to the herd. Such did not mean that they saw the negative aspects of their choice; rather, they saw either representing magnificent ways of life that man should strive for.

> There is not a preference. The author begins by promoting the above-it-all of the eagle's life but in the fourth stanza he tells us that if you can't follow the eagle, then you can still follow the mole to the underground solitude and still avoid the crowds.

Finally, there were the few who saw the two as equal, but equal in a negative sense. These students saw both as symbols representing ways of life man should not emulate.

> No. I feel neither the existence of the eagle nor the mole is to be preferred. Both live in isolation from fellow creatures and the poet seems to be censuring this aspect. To sail above the storm and stare into the sun is not as appealing as it might at first seem. The warmth in a shelter is better. Holding intercourse with roots of trees and stones is a beautiful part of life, but not if it is to sacrifice the communion of God's creatures with one another—creatures of all types.

The fourth question, asking what the real subject of the poem is, drew partially "right" answers from all writers. Everybody said that the poem was not about the eagle or the mole; all readers saw the eagle, mole, and herd as each representing ways of life for man. The difficulty students had with this question was that of defining what the poem is about; most added some of the interpretive material they had used in other answers, again stressing the values of the life of the eagle or that of the mole or both.

The question served to stimulate further invidious comparisons between the eagle-mole way of life and that of the herd. Twenty-two saw through to the irony of the poem, as the following illustrates:

> The eagle and the mole are symbolic representations of withdrawal from life. They represent two aspects of society—two personalities in society—the eagle being the disinterested, uninvolved, uncommitted aristocrat, and the mole being the unspired, unenlightened, isolated. The eagle is on the pedestal and the mole is under it. Symbolically the poet suggests the ludicrousness in withdrawal—the senseless meaningless of uninvolvement.

The final question produced the same kind of polarization that the third did. About 150 students preferred the life of the eagle, while only a few preferred the life of the mole. Those who wrote of the advantages of the lives of the eagle and the mole were adamant.

> One implication concerns the present way of life that man is leading, that of the herd. It is a way of life that begets hate, that forces the individual to surrender his individual qualities for the good of the social group. The words "herd," "flock" and "pack" imply that in this way of life everything is done together, in mass. The only way to escape this fate is to commune with nature, to get away from everything tainted, everything human. This idea is evident in the last line, where the poet says that it is all right for the reader to hold intercourse with "disembodied bones," for presumably these bones have been rid of all pollution.

Again, as with the preceding answers, the same twenty-two sensed the irony and intent inherent in the poem.

> I think the total poem implies for man the existence within the herd despite the fact that the herd is depicted as repulsive. The first three stanzas invite man to a stoic existence of which the poet seems to believe man is incapable. He then suggests an alternative way, the life of the mole, the description of which ends on a degrading note. It seems to me that the poem is written in an ironic tone which brings out the point that if man strives to live apart from the group he is either striving for the impossible or will have to be content with what is less than human. The poet seems to be directing his thoughts toward those who do not accept humanity as it is.

The answers quoted in the past several pages represent the performances of about two hundred students being trained especially as English teachers. As was indicated earlier, only twenty-two students sensed the inherent irony of the poem. The weaknesses displayed in the papers can be considered in several ways.

The first question displayed a major inability to write about literary tone; students either failed to write about tone at all or wrote about an inappropriate tone. Both of these manifestations are related to a failure to read the poem closely and an inability to translate an abstraction about a literary term into a specific commentary about a text in front of them. Tone is, after all, merely one of many such terms that we use in the study of literature. In *English in the Secondary School*, Edwin Sauer mentions more than twenty terms that secondary school students should be familiar with as they study literature.[6] Terms such as *meter*, *rhyme*, and *rhythm* as well as others on Sauer's list are more specific than tone. Yet if these prospective teachers are so vague and inept about an important aspect of poetry such as tone, we can expect little from the students they will be teaching. The inability to write clearly about tone, a specific aspect of this poem, bodes ill for the teaching performances of the students who participated.

The fact that most students preferred the existence of the eagle or, in a few instances, that of the mole to the life of the herd suggests several things. First of all, it again illustrates the lack of close attention to the text: the title is, after all, "The Eagle and the Mole," not "The Eagle or the Mole." Further, the text devotes an almost equal amount of space to each, growing increasingly ironic as the poem progresses. To miss these clues, on such a scale as the responses indicate, is evidence of failure to read closely. The fact that most preferred the way of life of

[6] Edwin Sauer, English in the Secondary School (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), pp. 179-180.

the eagle illustrates a stock response to a symbol. Such an occurrence suggests that, without guidance, these students will frequently misread and thus "misteach" literature. One wonders how Wylie could have made the irony any more apparent than she did. If the students missed it in this poem, they will probably miss it in other poems as well.

The answers reveal peculiar personal positions. While amateur psychoanalysis is not in order, it may be relevant to speculate on the classroom effects of teachers who as students so strongly endorse the life of the eagle and so vehemently condemn that of the herd or group. The reader will recall several personal asides which characterized some of the answers; such asides reveal more than a misreading of the poem. They are statements of the students' views of life. The personal asides were lamentable from the standpoint of how the students approached the reading of the poem; they reveal a kind of message-hunting. They again and again revealed the students' desire to liberate themselves from the ordinary range of men, a range they somehow regarded as dirty, something to be held in contempt.

Fundamentally, the responses in this admittedly limited exercise reveal a basic inability to confront a poem directly. We might argue that forty-five minutes is an unrealistic time period, that teachers preparing to teach a poem would be better prepared, that answers here are not typical of those which most teachers would produce. To argue so is to ignore the repeated evidence of a lack of close reading practices on a grand scale.

Returning to an earlier consideration it might be argued that the NCTE observers failed to see much close reading primarily because most teachers do not have the skill themselves and, consequently, cannot engage their students in it. Close reading skill is not the result of a haphazard series of courses in literature or a natural outgrowth of reading. It *is* a skill and one which demands study and discipline. The lack of this study and discipline may well result in the evidence manifested in these representive answers: inability to sense basic tone, tendency to ramble; susceptibility to stock responses, and the like. The evidence suggests that neither our best teachers nor our best students successfully confront poetry. In his summary comments in the study of high school English, James Squire urges the "support of our colleges and universities" for the promotion of improved teaching. Training in close reading skills seems a likely place to start.

INVASION OF THE TEXT

Charles Hoffman

Having taught high school English for many years with perhaps a minimum of formal scholastic preparation in close reading or literary analysis, I read Edward R. Ducharme's article "The Evasion of the Text" (*English Record,* February, 1970) with a growing feeling of uneasiness, if not chagrin. Was I being revealed as a charlatan, a teacher who failed to produce students adept at literary analysis, not because that skill is extremely difficult to teach to young people who do not intend to make a career of it, but because I was a text-evader, or maybe just a stupe who didn't understand the meaning of a relatively simple poem?

After long deliberation, I have concluded that if Mr. Ducharme is not a text-evader himself, he is, then, a text-invader. Neither pedagog makes a good teacher, it seems to me.

My feelings of uneasiness began with Mr. Ducharme's first question (in three variations) on Elinor's Wylie's "The Eagle and the Mole." "He's trying to hook me," I thought, squirming. "Better watch out." Before me appeared images of the fisherman-teacher, casting his beautiful but insidious lures into the turbulent, freshly-stocked stream of Academe and hauling out poor fish after poor fish until he could stand proudly before the ER camera with a record catch (200 *suckers, scholastica pedagogica*).

I did not know until later, however, that I would have to jump into that stream to warn any remaining fish to beware of the lures.

I have taught "The Eagle and the Mole" to high school juniors for several years, and although I am a rather strict "close-reading" practitioner in teaching poetry, I have never seriously thought of the poem's tone as ironic—and while Mr. Ducharme's article led me to re-analyze and re-assess my rather standard interpretation, I still find no irony, and I am appalled that Mr. Ducharme not only finds irony but condemns approximately 160 highly trained and apparently intelligent prospective English teachers—not to count those of us who are active teachers already—for *not* finding irony. At the same time he praises some 22 students for finding something that isn't in the poem but which suits his own particular, if not esoteric, taste.

Charles Hoffman is Chairman of English at New York Mills Junior-Senior High School. His article, "Relating Structure to Purpose," appeared in the Spring, 1961 issue of "The English Record."

Let me backtrack for a moment. It is my custom in studying poetry with a class to point out that poetry can be understood on at least three levels: the literal level which requires mastery of the words and syntax; the interpretative level which requires an understanding of the poetic use of language, symbols and various literary techniques or devices; and finally the personal level which, because it is based on the individual's feelings, experiences and imagination, may have no requirements or restrictions at all. I then emphasize that while the class may well be able to reach a common understanding on the first two levels, the third level is so personal and incontrovertible that we need not spend class time on it. I also warn that in moving to the second level of interpretation we must be especially careful to avoid sliding over into the third level; we must eliminate the *I*, avoid trying to force the poet to say what *we* want him to say or hope he had said: we must discover the poet's thoughts and feelings as revealed by the literal and symbolic meaning of the poem itself. "Keep as close to the poet as possible," I warn, "and when in doubt seek enlightenment through an exchange of opinions with other readers, through a reading of other poems by the poet, through anything the poet may have contributed aside from his poetry, and through the poet's own life experience itself.

I do not claim any originality for this approach; it has long been a standard and honored method. Mr. Ducharme seems to have thrown it into the ashcan.

I believe we both agree on the literal meaning of the poem; we disagree on the interpretation. He repeatedly asserts that the tone is ironic and that Elinor Wylie is actually rejecting the ways of life represented by the eagle and the mole. He indicates that "the life among the herd is indeed the only viable one." Perhaps for him, but not for the poet.

Although he expects justification from the students for their interpretations, he fails to justify his own. He writes, "the herd's way may engender hate, but it is the only life possible to man that offers communication and love. It *may* involve hate, but it is a risk that one must take; the alternatives are negations of life." I admonish Mr. Ducharme for rushing headlong into the third level of a poem's meaning and thereby setting a bad example for our future teachers.

The poet actually says, "The huddled warmth of crowds/ Begets and fosters hate." Could it be stronger? How justify *may*? Where are there any literal or symbolic references to a "risk" or to "communication and love"?

Mr. Ducharme seeks to offset the author's very strong—and

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many—direct adjectives characterizing the herd adversely by a single reference to "huddled warmth" which he finds favorable. Elinor Wylie was an aristocrat who did not like the crowd, and she could very easily have found "huddled warmth" disagreeable. Mr. Ducharme, evidently does not find it so, but we are trying to analyze Miss Wylie's meaning.

Mr. Ducharme feels that the strong force of the word *if* (line 13) merits special attention. *If* may well merit attention, not because it introduces a note of irony but because it introduces the second element of the title: the mole. Certainly nothing which follows *if* permits denial of the poet's actual words.

We may justify that the poet means exactly what she says by going to her other works which are replete with the so-called literal sentiments of "The Eagle and the Mole." Poem after poem shows her preference for the unique, both good and bad, attractive and unattractive; but never for the mediocre or commonplace. What would Mr. Ducharme do to "Nonsense Rhyme" or to these lines from "Puritan Sonnet": "I love the look, austere, immaculate,/ Of landscapes drawn in pearly monotones./ There's something in my blood that owns/ Bare hills, cold silver on a sky of slate . . ." Would this poet find the life of the eagle or the mole "actually a death"?

In his book of criticisms, *First Impressions*, written before Elinor Wylie had achieved her full fame, Llewellan Jones states, "And other poems in *Nets To Catch the Wind*—notably 'The Eagle and the Mole'—show that it is not only richness that Miss Wylie hates but enforced gregariousness and safety with their inevitable corollaries of immobility and suffocation."

Innumerable other authorities can be cited to support the "single-minded literalness" which Mr. Ducharme scorns in his students.

Some research on Miss Wylie's life is also in order if we seek to determine whether she really meant to be ironical. Carl Van Doren, who knew her personally, considered her a person of contradictions and extremes, happy and gay when she was the focus of attention and sad and tearful when she felt neglected. She was beautiful, vain, talented, intelligent and even scholarly. She was an aristocrat who moved in an elite circle and seemed to care little for the "herd" whose opinions and judgments she persistently defied and ignored. To give but one example, after abandoning her first husband and child she lived with Horace Wylie under an assumed name, in semi-seclusion, not yet divorced, withdrawn from the "herd's" reproach. She could live like the mole as well as like the eagle, but never like the sheep.

Just as I question the validity of Mr. Ducharme's interpreta-

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tion of the poem, so do I question the validity of the procedure by which he arrived at his conclusions concerning the capabilities of prospective—as well as the active—English teachers. It seems apparent that he started his research with some rather set opinions about both the poem and English teachers; he did not intend to be objective. For instance, he rewrote the first question twice because he "was unhappy about the results"; he hoped that early focusing on tone would help the students "start in the right direction" (whose right direction?); he was less sanguine (than Squire) about teachers being well-schooled in modern critical approaches; approximately 85% of the tested students had "wrong answers" (by whose criteria?); question 4 drew partially "right" answers from all the students; approximately 15% of the students sensed the irony and intent *inherent* in the poem (but did they properly substantiate this "sense"?).

Although 160 students, the vast majority of whom were in a Masters degree program, felt "the poem has a single-minded literalness about it," Mr. Ducharme does not seem to wonder at all whether or not *his* interpretation might be in doubt.

At several points he seems to be unconcerned about what the *poet* wants to say and very much concerned with what the student or he himself desires to say. Wylie does not need to glorify the eagle and the mole in order to show her positive rejection of the herd. She could be attracted to their isolation—as Mr. Ducharme evidently is not—or at the very least find their lives preferable to that of the herd. The sensitive artist is generally aware of, and prepared to pay, the price of "apartness" which his talent exacts from him.

In her novels, Elinor Wylie seeks to reveal the stoic in woman, and the stoic eagle is undoubtedly a bird with which she can identify. Nothing in the poem, incidentally, points to it as a bird of prey.

Since she was quite scholarly in her approach to her own work, seeking exact information and confirmation for details to be used in her writing, we may assume that she could also identify with the mole.

I must also question interpretations which find the mole's environment unattractive. The poet obviously finds it preferable to that of the herd. "Roots of trees" and river sources may, after all, be attractive references if related to the roots of the tree of life or knowledge and the sources of life which the isolated scholar seeks so studiously, if somewhat narrowly, to trace.

And since people in general would likely prefer the spotlighted life of the leader to the rather secluded life of the schol-

arly researcher, I am not surprised that most of the tested students—subtly urged to make a preference—chose the eagle's existence. Wylie does not seem to make a preference, but since the average human being seems to prefer light and airy spaces to dark and cramped quarters, we ought not to quarrel too violently with a supposition that the poet herself was partial to the eagle—as, indeed, she seemed to be in living her own life.

I should like to conclude by expressing some of my own opinions about teaching literary analysis. Every English teacher, at every level of education, should realize that literary analysis is a matter of give and take and cannot be a one-sided questioning and answering based on a neat set of opinions. I still find high school students adding to my understanding and appreciation of literature. When the time comes that I know absolutely what's right and what's wrong about a poem I know I will have ceased to understand that particular piece of writing.

The danger in Mr. Ducharme's interpretation of the poem as well as in his approach to research is that some teachers and future teachers might feel that to be successful they must convince their students that literature is filled with hidden meanings (beyond the understanding of even those with a Masters degree). Teachers have too often sought to catch students with that particular hook and have too often succeeded in scaring ordinary pupils away from intelligent efforts to understand a writer's message. Such an academic and pedagogical approach to literature leads students to reject it or to offer frequently fantastic distortions of even the clearest pieces of writing; they have been put on guard against the "unknown" which becomes the "known" only when the high priest-teacher reveals the awesome mysteries.

No teacher-dispensed analysis is worth a damn! The teacher can at best be only a facilitator of learning. A dialog or transaction between teacher and students and writer is basic to teaching literary analysis. Without interaction, analysis remains in a vacuum.

Just as analysis itself is not an esoteric art, neither should the teaching of it be. Let us not be afraid to stumble and even lean on the shoulders of our students. In that way we just might make it as educators.

AGAIN, EVASION OF THE TEXT

Edward Ducharme

Mr. Charles Hoffman, in his remarks entitled "Invasion of the Text," raises a number of points that might merit a reply. The difficulty in replying to some of them is that he has unfortunately chosen to include a homily on pedagogy while ostensibly reacting to a critical position. The remarks on teaching should be replied to because they represent too curious a mixture of pious humility and alleged scholarship. However, I will let the observations on teaching rest and turn to the equally serious business of close reading and teaching.

Let me begin by directly answering some of the specific questions. I do not really know whether or not Mr. Hoffman is a charlatan or a text-evader or a stupe. It is really beside the point to raise such rhetorical questions. The real question is to what degree are teachers and scholars "strict 'close-reading' practitioners" as Mr. Hoffman describes himself? In my article "Evasion of the Text," I pointed out that those examined were not such practitioners to any significant degree. Mr. Hoffman's remarks reveal that he is not. His central "proofs," other than asking unanswered questions, are (a) use of the poet's other work, including her fiction; (b) her life-style as an aristocrat; (c) early biographical criticism of Wylie's work; and (d) Carl Van Doren's half personal, half psychological remarks about her. All very interesting but hardly the epitome of close reading techniques. Close reading as a skill rests primarily on the confrontation between reader and poem, not between reader and secondary source, not between reader and his own view of life. Such is not to denigrate other approaches to literature but merely to state the difference. My contention is that close reading as a skill must be part of the training and background of every teacher of English, regardless of what critical mode he espouses. He must read what is in front of him.

Let me illustrate specifically the process of close reading by applying it in a detailed and specific way to "The Eagle and the Mole," something that perhaps I should have done in the original article.

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THE EAGLE AND THE MOLE

Avoid the reeking herd,
Shun the polluted flock,
Live like that stoic bird,
The eagle of the rock.

The huddled warmth of crowds
Begets and fosters hate;
He keeps, above the clouds,
His cliff inviolate.

When flocks are folded warm,
And herds to the shelter run,
He sails above the storm,
He stares into the sun.

If in the eagle's track
Your sinews cannot leap,
Avoid the lathered pack,
Turn from the steaming sheep.

If you would keep your soul
From spotted sight or sound,
Live like the velvet mole;
Go burrow underground.

And there hold intercourse
With roots of trees and stones,
With rivers at their source,
And disembodied bones.

(Elinor Wylie, *The Collected Poems of Elinor Wylie* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), p. 4.

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"The Eagle and the Mole" is a symbolic treatment of man's attitude towards his fellow men. Seemingly sympathetic towards extremes of life which foster isolation and seclusion, the poem ultimately embraces the life of man among men.

There is in the title an initial suggestion of things opposite, the eagle that soars high and the mole that burrows beneath the earth. The almost spontaneous response is indeed to think of these two objects from the natural world as opposites. Yet the title forces reconsideration of this process, for the two nouns are joined by the conjunction *and*, a consistent grammatical signal for parallelism. These words, so joined, indicate that while the eagle and the mole may be considered as opposites in the sense mentioned, there is also going to be something stated or implied that applies to both.

Wylie's method of presentation is, on the surface, straightforward. The first, second, and third stanzas deal with the eagle

and his position high above the mob or herd. After the transitional first two lines of the fourth stanza, the remainder of the poem is concerned with the mole and his position beneath but clearly removed from the herd.

The opening stanza is a series of three imperatives urging the listener or reader to shy away from any contact with large groups, masses, or herds; in brief, to live like the eagle, removed and above all things. The herd and flock are described by two extremely derogatory adjectives: *reeking* and *polluted*. The eagle is described as *stoic*, a word suggesting inner strength and power to endure; further, he is spoken of as "the eagle of the rock," a phrase suggesting strength.

The use of imperatives in the first stanza and in later portions of the poem indicates that the poet is speaking to the reader or to people in general. The poet's urgings are stated so that one must compare the eagle and the mole with humanity, that the attributes ascribed to the two creatures are to have some applicability to man. While such an indication is obvious from even a careless reading of the text, one must point it out and, more importantly, insist on keeping it in mind throughout the poem. It is not the creatures that are being described so much as it is the human types they represent.

At this point one should again consider the title. Because of the pairing of the two nouns by the word *and*, it was pointed out earlier that, even though opposite in one sense, the two creatures were going to be paired in some way. Since they cannot be paired in terms of activity or appearance, a logical other point of comparison might be the symbolic use the poet makes of the two. The first stanza has, in the reading given thus far, strongly suggested the power and force of the eagle, two attributes that might be considered positive. The question that now arises is that of the use the poet will make of the mole, a creature that is, after all, a member of a class of animals that burrow underground, rarely seeking the light. One must conclude that the poet is setting an impossible task, holding back something unexpected, or not using the eagle in the positive sense thus far suggested.

The first stanza contains one clue supporting the third alternative. The word *stoic* need not be read as a positive modifier of the eagle; instead, the work may suggest not courage but withdrawal.

The second stanza furthers the suggestion that the eagle might not be a positive symbol. The poet again speaks of the herd, this time in a slightly less negative way. The crowd is marked by huddled warmth, even though the warmth does beget

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and foster hate at times. There is, it seems, an obvious implication of the poet's statement: something begat the huddled warmth of the crowds in the first place, perhaps the desire for companionship or a show of affection. It is clear that stoicism did not beget it. The eagle himself is described in less potentially positive terms in the second stanza; the word *inviolate* suggests an almost excessive purity, a wish not to be bothered or touched by contact with the mob.

The opening of the third stanza continues the less harsh description of the masses as the poet speaks of the flocks' being "folded warm" as the eagle "soars above the storm" and "stares into the sun." The eagle, perhaps seen earlier as a symbol for human individualism, is now seen as a symbol for the non-human. What kind of human, even in a symbolic way, stares into the sun? One who will, if he stares long enough, become blind like the mole. In addition, the previously suggested implication of *inviolate* is furthered in "He sails above the storm," a statement implying a solution of a problem by avoiding it.

In the three stanzas dealing with the eagle, the bird is offered as a representative of a way of life suitable for those who would avoid the masses. In a spirit of irony that marks much of the poem, the poet implies that some cannot go the route of the eagle, yet would still avoid the pack. These are offered the way of the mole, that of a burrowed existence beneath life. This death in life existence of the mole is further evidence of the author's ironic intent. She is urging that man seek "life" underground, surrounded by dead bones. Further, the tripping rhythm throughout gives the lie to the imperatives of the poem.

The poet's strategy in her treatment of the mole is similar to her treatment of the eagle. She first uses several derogatory adjectives to describe the mob: *lathered, steaming*. She more quickly notes the negative way of the mole, however, by phrases such as "would keep your soul/From spotted sight or sound." Here, of course, is the "inviolate" of the second stanza.

Finally, the follower of the eagle who cannot leap into the eagle's track is urged to hold intercourse with roots, river sources, and disembodied bones, a singularly unattractive way of life.

The poem presents two alternatives, each unattractive as ways of life for human beings. If neither the way of the eagle nor the way of the mole is appropriate, what is the way of life proposed by the poet? Is it the way of the reeking herd, the polluted flock, the lathered pack and the steaming sheep? The solution does not lie outside the crowds, at least not in the ways of life represented by the eagle and the mole. If the solution

does not lie outside the crowds, it must lie within. Indeed, this is the direction the poem suggests. Supporting this conclusion are the previously noted progression of modifiers describing the crowds and the near-contempt for keeping one's soul from spotted sight or sound. The alternative to the avoiding and the hiding of the eagle and the mole is existence within.

There is another support for this conclusion. The masses are, in this poem, spoken of in terms of generating animals: *herd, flock, pack,* and *sheep.* Further, there is the succession of words suggesting, at a second level of reading, procreation: *begets, fosters, burrow,* and *intercourse.* An analysis of the last word cited will be used as an illustration.

As the poet is using the word *intercourse* in line 21, the word means discourse. Yet, placed in the poem with the presence of other words like *herds* and *flocks, begets* and *fosters,* the word takes on at the very least the suggestion of sexual intercourse. One then raises the question about what kind of sexual intercourse—even on a figurative level—one can have with roots of trees, with rivers at their sources and disembodied bones. The answer is that he can have the kind that reflects his life: removed, distant, dead—the kind of existence attributed to the eagle and the mole. A consideration of the second level of such words as well as the other aspects noted above does reinforce the idea that the poet is, by irony and understatement, saying that life can be lived only by participating in it, despite its occasional reeking and polluted qualities, perhaps even because of them. Lone and withdrawn existence may suffice for eagles and moles but not for man.

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"THE EAGLE AND THE MOLE": THE AFFECTIVE FALLACY REVISITED

Edward H. Kelly

I enjoyed Messrs. Hoffman and Ducharme's confrontation over "The Eagle and the Mole" by Elinor Wylie (*English Record,* XXI, No. 1, October, 1970). If these opponents will allow a post-battle analysis, I suggest that Mr. Hoffman loses a close decision, although he fights quite properly, according to the Marquis of Queensberry's rules of criticism. Mr. Ducharme, a slightly unorthodox free-swinger, scores with occasional lucky punches, making him uncertain of his own victory at the final bell. Both contenders seem to have trained with an eye on the affective fallacy: Mr. Hoffman to duck it at all costs; Mr. Ducharme to build his entire fight on it. In short, Mr. Ducharme commits the error of judging the work of art wholly in terms of its personal results, but he is able to detect the irony present in the poem; Mr. Hoffman makes the mistake of totally discounting personal reactions by electing "not to spend class time" on a reader's individual feelings and misses the irony.

Both commentators are certainly aware of the danger in critical techniques that rely too heavily on one approach, yet their propensities to evaluate from what seems to be fixed critical positions makes both their methods subject to some qualification. In analyzing any literary work solely from affect one usually runs the risk of assuming intent on the author's part; for example, Mr. Ducharme at times commits this corollary heresy: "this death-in-life existence of the mole is further evidence of the author's ironic *intent,*" (p. 111, my italics). The formal critic, on the other hand, after dutifully studying a writer's corpus along with all that has been written on him, and after assuming that he knows his author's intent, can still misinterpret, as seems to be the case with Mr. Hoffman, who pays strict attention to Miss Wylie's habits of life and mind but fails to go beyond what is merely procedurally correct in his own theory of criticism. Hoffman's "standard and honored" three-step critical attack is admirable only as far as it is applicable. His first level of poetic analysis—the literal—might well be challenged in any discussion of "The Eagle and the Mole," for clearly the poem cannot be taken literally, only symbolically. And despite Mr. Hoffman's using biography to correctly assess Miss Wylie's per-

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sonal reserve, he relies too frequently on critics who exhibit a similar biographical bias in interpreting her poetry. In fact at one point, in an effort to substantiate his preconceived opinion of Miss Wylie's poem, Hoffman uncorks a low blow in choosing not to quote Lewellyn Jones in his entirety (p. 105). Jones actually says, "And other poems in *Nets to Catch the Wind* [Miss Wylie's first volume of poems], notably 'The Eagle and the Mole' and 'Sanctuary'—show that it is not only richness that Mrs. [*sic*] Wylie hates but enforced gregariousness and safety, with their inevitable corollaries of immobility and suffocation." Hoffman neglects to cite "Sanctuary,"a poem which has little to do with "enforced gregariousness." Jones means, I think, that "Sanctuary" is a corollary of "The Eagle and the Mole," a view that surely undermines Mr. Hoffman's position. But because Jones's syntax is not clear Hoffman may be forgiven for misreading him. At any rate, according to Jones, Miss Wylie hates, among other things, "richness" (her poem "Wild Peaches"), "enforced gregariousness," "safety," "immobility," and "suffocation." Had Ducharme elected to cite (and read?) other of Miss Wylie's poems he might have used "Sanctuary" nicely to counter Hoffman's scholarly jabs.

Since the theme of "Sanctuary," another short dramatic lyric touching on excellence and isolation, is central to the discussion, the poem can be briefly considered here.

"Sanctuary," like "The Eagle and the Mole," symbolizes what seems at first to be a desirable withdrawal from any human contact, but the poem ends with the abrupt realization that no such seclusion is possible. In discussing "Sanctuary," James Kreuzer points out that "literally, life cannot be sustained in an airtight cell; symbolically, man cannot isolate himself, cannot withdraw from all that is life, cannot live entirely in a dream world—and remain alive." [2]

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Despite the biographical proofs of Miss Wylie's craving for withdrawal from the realities of living, undoubtedly most critics would agree that the sensitive speaker in "Sanctuary" shudders and rebels at the placing of the last brick. In other words, although the artistic soul might cry out for beautiful and perfect isolation, it knows that such denial of human contact can only result in death. Similarly, although less explicitly, in "The Eagle and the Mole" the *three* extreme symbolical choices offered are equally undesirable for artist as well as lesser human being. As a result, one cannot wholly accept Mr. Ducharme's instinctual response that "the poem ultimately embraces the life of man among men" (p. 109). In "Sanctuary" one feels that the speaker is trying to convince himself of the need for a solitude which gives birth to the original, to beauty unfamiliar and perilous. Naturally, such isolation also gives birth to the opposite, to the perverse. Correspondingly, in "The Eagle and the Mole" neither staring into the sun nor burrowing underground nor mingling with the reeking, polluted herd can be considered happy alternatives. The poem, therefore, only grudgingly "embraces" the *necessity* of living life among men.

Mr. Hoffman's willingness to rely on intent but to deny its consequence, affect, may well be responsible for his missing the tone of the poem. His unwillingness to rely on feeling knowledge, a response to that which is commonly known and felt by mankind at large, limits his critical views. Without invoking the authoritarian precautions of a Wimsatt or Beardsley one might look to the advice of an artist which bears on the critical problem at hand: ". . . it is well for the world that it sees only the beauty of the completed work and not its origins nor the conditions from whence it sprang; since knowledge of the artist's inspiration might often but confuse and alarm and so prevent the full effect of its excellence." [3]

It should be clear that I do not admonish Mr. Hoffman for going to sources outside the immediate work under consideration, for a critic must draw on *all* material relevant to the proper reading of a poem. But banking wholly on intent misleads him. On the other hand, in judging Mr. Ducharme's "affective" approach, one surmises that in the case of "The Eagle and the Mole" his emotional response is generally valid. However, the safest course in criticism of the kind under discussion would seem to be a happy combination of the two methods, one which would employ both internal and external criteria in analysis.

NOTES

[1] **Collected Poems of Elinor Wylie (New York, 1938), p. 14.**
[2] **Kreuzer discusses "Sanctuary" solely as an example of symbolical meaning in poetry, Elements of Poetry (New York, 1964), pp. 164-166.**
[3] **Thomas Mann, Death in Venice, translated by H. T. Lowe-Porter (New York, 1936), pp. 46-47.**

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